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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the travails of the writing center at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. The paper recounts how the center has been forced to move physically several times in the past few years and has battled a budget crunch as well. It explains that, although the English Department has been allocating enough money from its budget to support the basic staffing of the Center, it is supporting a service that the entire campus is invited to use, and the Center makes do without the research assistance and student support that other departments obtain from similar budget lines. The paper then explains how the Center's director prioritized the needs of the Writing Center in this order: train and professionalize the tutors; advertise services and network with faculty from English and other departments; advocate for a tenure-track faculty line to assume responsibility for the Center; and finally, prepare proposals for better facilities, updated equipment, and more money for tutor wages. It delineates some ideas that were used in training sessions. The paper concludes that, given the absence of resources of every kind, what needed to be done (and was done) was to get the tutors themselves interested in turning the Writing Center around and making it a visible, valued resource on campus. (NKA)

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Out of the Basement: Making Writing Center Improvements with Very Little Money or Support.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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OUT OF THE BASEMENT: MAKING WRITING CENTER IMPROVEMENTS WITH VERY LITTLE MONEY OR SUPPORT

The Writing Center at Kutztown University, which is located in southeastern Pennsylvania, has existed in one form or another since the 1980s. It has been frequently moved from one inadequate location to another because the space needs of others have always taken precedence. The last move occurred, for example, due to the remodeling job on the Graduate Center which meant that the departments housed in that building needed new temporary offices. The Writing Center space, then in an obscure basement location, was suddenly an attractive alternative office space, and it was easy to move us—right? Actually, I did not even find out that our space was being shown to potential new occupants until the tutors asked me why people were coming into the Center, looking around, and talking about where to put their desks—all the while not speaking to the them. Only after my department chair and I both made inquiries and protests, did someone from the provost's office decide to tell us what was going on.

This last unlooked-for opportunity to move actually turned out to benefit the Writing Center—well, sort of. The current space *is* superior in terms of its central location and the absence of the smell of dirty diapers and peanut butter sandwiches wafting over from the Children's Center. The new Center is only about one-quarter of the size of the old one, but that room was so hard to find that *I* got lost the first time I looked for it. The Center's current location is along a major hallway in Old Main which is a multipurpose building that houses classrooms, dorms and offices. There is always traffic past our door, allowing students to even discover us by accident. At the beginning of last year, it almost seemed as if the Writing Center were entering a new era of prosperity and recognition—and then the roof fell in, *literally*. That is, the showers in the dorms overhead began to leak. Who could have anticipated that the university Facilities Office would engage in a long legal battle with the contractor who recently

installed these shower units? And who could have imagined that Facilities would suspend tarps and hoses from the ceiling to catch the gray water that drains down into buckets that we have had to empty? But perhaps we all could have predicted that really fixing this problem for the Writing Center would not be at the top of anybody's list of priorities. Clearly these conditions are unacceptable, not to mention unhealthy, and we've been trying to make that understood. That, however, is another story.

As you might imagine, it isn't only the Writing Center *space* that has been a continuous battle, but the budget as well. In fact, the Writing Center is still completely supported by the English Department. My department has been allocating enough money from its budget to support the basic staffing of the Center, which, in the last two years, has amounted to enough money to pay undergraduate student wages for 24-30 hours per week for 13 weeks each semester. In addition, the department has been almost entirely giving up its allocation of three graduate assistantships to the Writing Center. While my department supports a service that the entire campus is invited to use, we make do without the research assistance and student support that other departments obtain from similar budget lines. Faculty from my department are beginning to wonder why we should totally support the Writing Center, particularly when our strategies to increase student visits from all across the campus meant that, for last year, 25% of our visits were with students taking classes in other departments.

Secretarial and administrative support drain further resources from the English Department, but we now at least have a new tenure-track Director of the Writing Center who can oversee it and be responsible for identifying and pursuing its needs. Until this year, one faculty member was expected to coordinate the Composition Program, administer the Writing Center, and teach three classes per semester. This situation was untenable, as I discovered last year. In

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fact, I found that I was only able to make any progress at all in the Writing Center by neglecting the other half of my administrative duties. While I had a graduate student to assist with the daily business of the Center, he did not have the authority or the responsibility to move issues forward, go to meetings with administrators, and so on. The new faculty Director of the Writing Center does have one course of reassigned time "just" to administer the Center, but it is an ongoing battle to convince the administration that both the Composition Coordinator and the Writing Center Director need release time to do our jobs properly.

When I officially assumed these positions about a year and a half ago, I began to wonder how to transform the Writing Center with almost nothing. How could I turn the Writing Center into a respectable and respected student service? How could I train the tutors without any extra money to pay them or a course for which they could receive credit? Could I really expect them to do homework for the training sessions without any compensation for the time spent? Actually, what we decided is that I would pay the tutors for the hour per week that we met, but not for the time they spent in preparation for the meetings. What about the change of location? Would that help or hinder us? Would the new, smaller space allow us to work effectively with students or would it be too crowded, too noisy? I decided that I should let the returning tutors know what I was thinking, and in interviews with prospective tutors, clearly detail my expectations for the job. In other words, I figured that I needed to quickly get the tutors on my side and make them understand the necessity of my increased expectations. Fortunately for me, the two graduate students who used to argue with each other over whose turn it was to tutor were leaving, and the returning tutors accepted my plans.

In directing the Center last year, it seemed *obvious* that I should focus on tutor training because the tutors were going to be on the front lines, usually without any faculty supervision. It

was essential that I be able to count on them to be professional and capable of handling the increasing variety of tutoring situations that I hoped we would be encountering. During the previous year, the graduate student in charge of daily affairs had been a good tutor himself, but he had not had the power or the charge to train his peers and turn the Center into a professional service. The result had been lackluster and undependable tutoring services as well as much free time for the tutors, time they had used to do their homework, play drums, and nap.

I therefore prioritized the needs of the Writing Center in this order: train and professionalize the tutors, advertise our services and network with faculty from English and other departments, advocate for a tenure-track faculty line to assume responsibility for the Center, and finally, prepare proposals for better facilities, updated equipment, and more money for tutor wages. I reasoned that we had to make the Writing Center a place to which my colleagues would be willing to send their students before we did anything else because I knew that many had previously *and actively* discouraged their students from visiting us. I then needed to get the word out that the tutors *were* being trained, and faculty needed to see the results of that training in the papers their students were submitting to them.

As part of the training, I actually invited faculty from my own and other departments to come and speak with the tutors about some of their more difficult writing assignments. We listened and asked questions, clearly demonstrating our interest in and intention of helping their students in appropriate ways. We spoke with only six or seven professors last year, but the impact of this strategy was far-reaching as they spread the word to other people that *these* tutors were serious about their work. Our new allies became very significant to us, in fact, when it seemed that the one course of reassigned time for the tenure-track Writing Center director being hired was in jeopardy. The chair of the Social Work/Criminal Justice Department found out

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about this proposed retraction of release time and wrote an impassioned memo to our administrators protesting this threat in the strongest terms. For this year at least, our new director, Linda Cullum, does have the reassigned time. Moreover, I've noted that many of my colleagues mentioned the Writing Center in their syllabi this year, suggesting to me their confidence in changes that we have made. Additionally, verbal and written comments praising and thanking us for our work have come from several other colleagues within and beyond the English Department.

I have enclosed a copy of the Fall 1999 Training Calendar in your packet. If you look at it, you'll see that the weekly meetings were really focused on basic skills and protocol. At the first meeting, for example, we reviewed the expectations for dress and behavior, how to greet students coming into the center, the importance of punctuality, and the importance of keeping accurate records of student visits. The book that we used for training was, in fact, a "freebie" titled *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, given to me by a publisher. However, starting with the basics, beginning with the assumption that the tutors might be decent writers and grammarians but not skilled tutors, was exactly what was needed. We needed to discuss, for example, how the writing process affected and limited the tasks one might attempt to complete with a tutee. In fact, one of the hardest lessons at first, and one that we had to repeatedly review, was that they should not try to attend to all of the possible issues in a paper at one session. We also discussed the various roles a tutor might fulfill for a tutee—coach, counselor, teacher—and how one's work would shift with each role. Partially at the request of the tutors, we spent two training sessions talking about and role-playing ESL sessions since a significant number of our student visits center on ESL problems and most of the tutors felt least capable in this area. Clearly, we could have spent twice as much time as we did on ESL-related situations, but the

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time we did spend gave everyone a few ideas and new techniques to try. One undergraduate tutor, Jim Boice, said that while these sessions were the most difficult for him, they were also the most useful. They taught him that ESL students will often sit and nod their heads as if they understand when in fact they don't. Now he knows not to be lulled into believing his work is done if an ESL student is being agreeable.

Another valuable training tool was assigning tutors to prepare a topic for presentation at a training meeting. For the fall semester, each tutor had to take a writing center issue or question that he or she wanted to learn more about, read a relevant article, and then prepare a handout and presentation. One graduate assistant p epared materials on ESL tutoring and even conducted the two different role-playing situations in which several tutors participated. Another tutor prepared an extensive handout on working with Learning Disabled students, and another, who wanted to clarify odd spelling rules for herself, prepared a multi-page handout that could be given to students who had spelling problems. These projects helped tutors gain skills and confidence in dealing with specific, difficult situations, but they also resulted in the tutors becoming more invested in the Writing Center and its success. By the end of the first semester, there was a real sense of camaraderie among the tutors. They understood their own and each other's strengths, and they felt comfortable turning to each other for advice and assistance. Graduate assistant Heather Kendall claims that she actually learned most from paying attention to others' approaches to various situations.

A regular part of the meeting was a review of what had happened since the previous week's meeting, so we had an opportunity each week to talk through problems and pat ourselves on the back for our successes. As Jim Boice says, these meetings provided him with a forum in which to talk about problematic sessions. In talking through some of these situations—for

example, the tutee who was becoming too dependent on a tutor, or the student who became angry when the tutor refused to "fix" the paper for him or her—I tried to assist the tutors in discovering alternative approaches that they might try because they were probably going to encounter these situations again, and they would probably be on their own when it happened. I wanted them to be able to figure out what to do—and to feel comfortable turning to each other for assistance. In helping them to become more adept and self-reliant in their tutoring, I could also feel more comfortable about what was going on in the Center even though I was only there three or four hours a week. It was essential to have the tutors invested in its success, and giving them the sense that I paid attention to their perceptions and observations and was often guided by them, really helped, *as did regular infusions of my homemade chocolate chip cookies*.

To analyze what happened in our Writing Center over the past year, I would say that, given the absence of resources of every kind, what I needed to do and succeeded in doing for the most part, was getting the tutors themselves invested in turning the Writing Center around and making it a visible, valued resource on campus. They worked much harder last year than they had previously, and some of the work they did was not for money, but they had the benefit of feeling proud of their work, of receiving praise for their efforts on a fairly regular basis, and of truly gaining valuable work experience. I treated them as professionals and expected them to see themselves as professionals to the extent that I instituted a reasonably rigorous evaluation process. They were required to submit portfolios (*see the handout in your packet*) and have conferences with me at the end of both semesters after which I wrote evaluation letters. Already, I have been asked to turn some of those letters into recommendation letters for work and graduate school applications. So they are beginning to reap the benefits of their efforts. We had light moments, too, but I tried to maintain high standards and expectations.

I am not sure if or when we will get a permanent facility that is really big enough for us, but it feels as if we are building a little momentum. Actually, within the past week, we have been promised a bigger room and one which is not directly under dormitory showers. Linda Cullum continues to train the tutors and explore ways of expanding the Center, perhaps through grants. The tutors expect to be involved in training, and they are much more professional now. They are the core of the success of the turnaround in the Writing Center at Kutztown University. Yes, I feel a little nostalgic now. I miss the joking around and work we did together, and I miss the excitement of seeing the Center change and grow so quickly.

Further evidence of the tutors' work, and the simultaneous professionalization of our Writing Center, is in your handouts: there is a bookmark, appointment card, and sheet of stationery with the new logo designed by tutor Melanie Mood for her spring semester project, and there is also a copy of the Mission Statement co-authored by tutors Kelly Reed and Tim Bonner. While there is a lot left to do, we discovered that it actually is possible to make positive and visible changes in a short period of time without much money or administrative support. At this point, however, is important to note that our efforts are being recognized and beginning to pay off in small ways. If I had had to continue attempting to coordinate Composition and supervise the Writing Center, I believe I would have resigned the position—or something. What makes this a success story, then, is that people around us were quick to recognize, respond to, and support what we were doing—more or less. Even with leaky showers, tarps and hoses, it is clear to me that we are not in the same place now as we were a year ago.